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## Memories of Cuscaden Park

Donna Parrino

In 1945 my parents built a two-bedroom, stuccoed house at 1311-17<sup>th</sup> Avenue in Ybor City. It sat directly across 14<sup>th</sup> Street from the Cuscaden Park basketball courts. Later, they moved to be nearer the rest of the family in the Carrollwood area, but, for almost forty years, 1311 was home. Our neighbors across 14<sup>th</sup> Street and adjacent to the courts were the Cuscaden family: Arthur Jr., his mother, and his granddaughter. Nestled on an extensive property amid ancient oaks and dense foliage, their house resembled a weathered yellow-pine cabin, albeit oversized, one would more readily find deep in Florida's forests. Mr. Cuscaden, who according to the 1940 US Census was a 48-year-old wholesale ammunition salesman, kept to himself, but over the years he grew to be friendly with my dad. I guess he appreciated that Daddy kept our property well-manicured and we were quiet, helpful neighbors. Occasionally, we'd hear a shotgun blast and later learn Cuscaden had killed a pesky rattler. I recall seeing him return from hunting trips with his shotgun, hound dog, and his kills. He would skin deer in his shed. It was like living next to Daniel Boone! Son of the senior Arthur who donated the land to the city for Cuscaden Park, Arthur Jr. died in 1970.

I remember the baseball leagues' games with cars all around the park. One could hardly drive down 14th Street because autos lined both sides, parked

helter-skelter. The only times I went to those games were if my dad took me, as I was too young to go alone. On game nights we could hear the roar of the crowd as the lights illuminated the skies. Those packed three-sided bleachers were just superb for watching baseball and sharing in community life. Sadly, the city did not maintain them and they disappeared altogether sometime in the '90s.

I grew up in the '50s and, like many Ybor kids, inhabited the park every day. When I came home from school at nearby Our Lady of Perpetual Help Academy (OLPH for short), I'd do my homework, have a snack, and head to the park. Pop Cuesta of local baseball coaching fame was in my class but I don't remember seeing him at the park; that's probably because he was always with Mr. Espolita at the baseball field. I do recall seeing tennis great Judy Alvarez, who competed internationally, practice, practice, practice at the tennis courts. Sometimes I'd meet friends for basketball, or volleyball if the net was up. Other times we would head to the northwest end of the park where some fun playground equipment provided thrills. There were about eight huge swings—the chains on them were so thick they could've anchored a battleship—and we'd compete to see who could swing the highest, then jump off. I don't think they install such high swings in playgrounds anymore due to cost and liability. There were two slides, one of

which could give you nosebleed it was so high! There was also a green hop-on merry-go-round which, if bigger boys hopped aboard, would go very fast and we'd have to hold on for dear life. In the northwestern-most corner some seesaws sat empty most of the time. Sometimes my friends and I would park ourselves at the breezy top of the bleachers, look out over the pool, and chat about boys or what we'd be when we grew up. In the evenings during cooler months, there'd be organized volleyball games at the courts--about 40 kids, mostly from the old Jefferson High School which served Ybor City. Ms. Viola Mexico would referee those games.

During the summer months, Cuscaden hosted a wonderful recreation program led by Ms. Mexico. She and Andres Espolita were the two full-time City Recreation Department employees at the park. Naturally, the boys hung out with him and the girls gravitated to Ms. Mexico. Both of them were held in high regard by the kids. Since Mr. Espolita hailed from Ybor, he knew many of the parents—I was aware he knew my dad—and that gave him leverage with the boys, especially. “If you don't shape up, I'm gonna call your father,” he'd threaten and the boys would tow the line. Espolita was devoted to making good ball players and men out of them.

I don't know how Ms. Mexico ended up in Tampa as she was a native of North Dakota, daughter of an Irish father—last name Laird-- and a Canadian mother. According to the 1940 US Census, she was born in 1894 and lived on Branch Avenue near Hillsborough High School. She was college educated and earned \$904 in 1939 as a recreation supervisor. A widow, she was raising two daughters. One of the rooms on the ground floor of the pool's

southwest side served as Ms. Mexico's office, and equipment space for both her and Mr. Espolita. When you arrived at the park and wanted a volleyball or basketball or baseball gear, you would go to the room and Ms. Mexico would supply your needs and say, “Be sure to bring it back when you're through playing.” Often, kids would forget and she'd recruit volunteers to round up the stray stuff before closing. Once in a while, an older boy would be disrespectful to her and he would soon hear that a displeased Mr. Espolita wanted to talk to him.

The room was also the locale of the summer arts and crafts program, held from nine to noon. I remember lots of paste and cut-up paper. Once we made papier-mâché vases, but my favorite craft was basket-weaving. We learned to make pot holders first; then all sorts of baskets, some quite elaborate, out of pine needles sown together with raffia strung on huge needles. I have often seen such baskets in Native American museums and muse that I made similar ones in Ms. Mexico's program.

At noontime, everyone headed home for lunch. Afterwards, we gathered at the shady bleachers where there might be a breeze, for story-time at 1 pm. Sometimes we'd experience a welcome thunderstorm there which really cooled us off. Story-time was led by Ms. Mexico and her helpers, teen-aged Dolores and Sharon Wehle. The Wehle family, who lived on 17<sup>th</sup> Avenue just west of 12<sup>th</sup> Street, consisted of the parents and over a dozen children. They told us stories and led us in songs like, “She'll Be Comin' Round the Mountain.” Years later I learned Dolores had become a nun, teaching in Key West. After story-time, kids would grab their towels and head to the pool for a swim; the cost was ten cents

to swim and included the locker. The Del Rios managed the pool for many years. I didn't go swimming very often as I was an only child and my mother had fears of my drowning. I did like to go up to the pool gallery to watch my friends swim. Later, the gallery was a place to watch the boys show off their diving skills. One kid, Mike Garcia from Jefferson High School, dove well enough to compete locally and beyond.

All the girls, especially, loved Ms. Mexico. She treated everyone with great respect and kindness. I recall she was always professionally dressed, never sloppy or too casual in her slacks. She kept her lipstick fresh, her hands well-manicured with red nail polish, and she had more freckles than sand on the beach almost. Always with a sports cap atop her reddish hair, she spoke with a country accent. She'd arrive in her Buick promptly at nine each morning and never left before official closing time. Although she knew no

Spanish, Ms. Mexico could communicate a caring and kind ambience to all. She died in April 1975 at age 81, having greatly impacted—like Mr. Espolita-- many lives.

Cuscaden Park was a community mecca that gave kids a lot of freedom and valuable lessons on several levels, while offering parents security in knowing their children were safe and well cared for. We learned the fun of being “on our own,” of competition, and the importance of respect and sportsmanship. It also was a nurturing cradle for many great ballplayers—like Frank Permuy and Tony LaRussa who lived down my street-- emerging from Tampa. At one time, the park even sponsored a float each year in the Children's Gasparilla Parade, Ms. Mexico and Mr. Espolita marching happily alongside it. Like hundreds of others, I have fond memories of Cuscaden Park and firmly attest it truly deserves a high place in the pantheon of Tampa historical sites.

*Donna Parrino is a native of Ybor City, a retired USF administrator and educator, and a community advocate.*